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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GAZANS BREAK FROM JAIL DETAINEES IN OCTOBER 2003
EMBASSY ATTACK

Classified By: Pol/C Norm Olsen, per 1.4(b) and (d).

This is a joint cable from ConGen Jerusalem and Embassy Tel Aviv.

1. (U) Palestinian militants from the Popular Resistance Committee (PRC) staged a prison break at the civil jail in Gaza City April 21, freeing several suspects held in connection with the October 15 attack on an embassy convoy that killed three Americans, according to a statement issued by the PRC April 22. The statement claimed that the PRC had successfully freed three of the four suspects; the fourth prisoner could not be freed, the statement continued, as he was being held in a secluded cell elsewhere in the building. The PRC in its statement justified the action by claiming that a Palestinian court had ordered the four men released over a month ago, and that the four were being unlawfully held in jail. Descriptions of the break varied from non-violent to a gun battle.

2. (S) The ConGen contacted Minister of Interior Hakam Bal'awi April 22 for clarification. An assistant said that the MOI would provide a full report once it had investigated the incident. (Note: ORCA has reported separately on this incident April 22).

3. (C) Palestinian newspapers carried conflicting reports on the details of the jail break, and rumors about the incident abound, with some claiming that tens of other prisoners were also freed during the breakout. Although there were reports of a gun battle, one source told Poloff that the escape happened without a shot fired -- the PRC men simply entered the jail, overpowered the guards (who allegedly put up little resistance), and freed their comrades. In another version, several men entered the jail on the pretext of visiting some of the inmates. Once inside the building, however, the men overpowered the guards, allowed a much larger group of militants into the jail, and freed the prisoners.

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